"Dad says, criminals are stupid."

THE SON OF VENGEANCE

THANOS KALAMIDAS

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Thanos Kalamidas

The son of Vengeance

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I.

Deep fog hung heavy over Växjö Lake, cloaking the town in a veil of eerie sounds and muffled echoes. Sporadic lights and streetlamps cast an unsettling glow, their hazy beams swallowed by the swirling mist. It was a scene devoid of life, no traffic rumbling through the streets, no pedestrians seeking solace in the muted night. The clock had just struck twelve, leaving the town in an unsettling quietude.

On the east side of the lake, a car glided silently along a deserted street. Inside, two burly figures occupied the front seats, their faces obscured by the gloom. One could mistake them for weary salesmen returning from a late meeting, with their dark jackets and thin ties adding to the illusion. However, the tell-

tale presence of a large black bag, a smaller one, and two pairs of black leather gloves piled precariously in the backseats hinted at a more sinister purpose.

"Pull over," muttered the passenger, his voice barely a whisper above the muffled sounds of the night. Across the sidewalk loomed the vague outline of a weathered wooden fence. Further down the street, a faint yellow light flickered above a wooden door, barely discernible through the swirling mist.

"Here's good," the driver replied, his voice a low rumble. He eased the car to a stop against the curb.

The passenger, a stocky man well into his fifties dressed entirely in black, exuded an undeniable air of menace. His heavy face, with its two beady eyes, held a cruel glint that even the darkness couldn't conceal.

"You know the drill," he said to his hulking companion in the driver's seat. "I handle the talking, you… well, you be muscle. Remember the plan? Don't deviate. Capiche?"

The driver, a towering figure compared to his partner, responded with a curt nod.

"What if he's not there?" a hint of uncertainty crept into the tall man's voice.

"He'll be there," the older man insisted with unwavering certitude. "I know Emil Persson."

He leaned forward, checking the luminous glow emanating from his wristwatch. When it precisely indicated 12:15, he muttered a curt "Now!" and swiftly flung open his car door.

The two men disembarked, leaving the car shrouded in darkness. The driver had switched off the headlights before stopping, plunging them into deeper anonymity. The faint glow from the streetlamp cast their elongated shadows onto the pavement, highlighting the stark contrast between their heights. As the older man rounded the car to join his partner, the tall man couldn't help but flash a cryptic smile, harbouring thoughts he kept hidden from his companion.

They crossed the silent street, passing by the weathered fence before reaching the doorway with its single, flickering light. The giant fiddled with his car keys, his movements almost playful.

"Nervous?" the older man inquired his voice gruff.

"Never," the tall man replied with a confident air, swiftly stashing the keys in his pocket.

The older man rapped twice on the door, waiting patiently for a response. After a tense couple of seconds, he pounded harder with his fist, impatience simmering beneath the surface. A muffled voice emanated from within, followed by shuffling sounds. Finally, a gruff voice inquired through the door, "Who's there?"

Both men stood in stony silence, waiting for a response. Minutes bled into an eternity, punctuated only by the silence from within and the ever-thickening fog that seemed to coil around them.

Frustration mounting, the older man slammed his fist against the door with renewed vigour, the resounding thud echoing through the night. The tall man smirked, his eyes fixated on the doorknob, knowing the man inside was likely watching them through the peephole.

The tension finally broke as the door creaked open, revealing a man in his mid-forties with a thick beard and a belly that strained against his shirt. He squinted at the figures cloaked in shadow, a flicker of recognition dawning in his eyes.

"Emil," the older man greeted, a sly smirk twisting his lips. "Remember me?"

Emil's eyes widened in a mixture of fear and something akin to resignation. This unwelcome visit was about to shatter the uneasy peace that had settled over Växjö Lake, setting in motion a chain of events that would forever alter the town's shrouded past.

II.

A suffocating silence stretched in the hallway, punctuated only by the ragged breaths of the three men. Minutes bled into infinity as Emil, the bearded man, felt a cold dread gnawing at his insides. Every muscle in his body tensed as his gaze flickered between the older man with a sickly-sweet smile and the imposing figure of the tall man leaning against the wall. The tall man held himself stiffly, like a coiled viper ready to strike at the slightest provocation.

"You alright, Emil?" The older man inquired, his voice dripping with a false cheer that sent shivers down Emil's spine.

"Peachy, thanks for asking," Emil replied, his voice strained as he kept a wary eye on the tall man.

"The wife, Emil? How's the lovely wife doing?" The older man persisted, his smile widening unnaturally.

"With her family," Emil answered curtly, not daring to look away from the menacing silhouette.

"And the little one, Emil? What was his name again? Slipped my mind for a moment," the older man prodded, a hint of malice flickering in his eyes.

"With his mother," Emil mumbled, his throat tightening.

"A clever little one, that's for sure," the older man remarked, finally turning his gaze towards the tall man. "Last time I was here; he was peeking from behind the door, listening to our conversation, wasn't he?"

"We weren't having a conversation, you were threatening me," Emil retorted, a flicker of anger sparking in his eyes.

The older man chuckled, the sound devoid of humour. "Oh, Emil, that was just some friendly advice."

"It felt more like a threat," Emil muttered, his voice laced with defiance.

The older man's smile faltered for a brief moment, then he shrugged, pretending not to hear Emil's last remark. "Speaking of, the boss isn't in the best of moods, you see."

Emil remained silent, his jaw clenched, his gaze unwavering as he stared at the impassive face of the tall man.

"Can't say the same for his wife and kid, but the boss himself, well; let's just say he's not doing well, Emil. And do you know why he's not doing well?"

Emil didn't reply, his silence a thunderous roar in the tense atmosphere.

"And guess who else isn't doing so well, Emil?" the older man continued, his voice laced with a dangerous edge. Seeing Emil's stoic expression, he added, "The boss's bank account, Emil."

The tall man finally spoke, a cruel grin stretching across his thin lips. "Poor thing, the bank account. Been waiting ten whole days for you, Emil. Nothing new from Växjö, eh?"

"Ten days since my last visit, Emil," the older man chimed in, his voice laced with a barely concealed tremor. "And with inflation skyrocketing, well, you

get the picture." The mention of inflation seemed almost random, a desperate attempt to shift the focus.

Emil finally diverted his gaze from the tall man to the older man, a spark of defiance igniting in his eyes. "So, you brought your oversized friend here to remind me about inflation?" he asked, a newfound courage rising in his voice. The tall man's smirk widened, revealing a gap-toothed grin.

The older man's face contorted in surprise. "Hobbit brought a giant to scare you?" Emil pressed on, emboldened by the stunned silence. "Is that it?"

A deep flush crept up the older man's neck, his face turning the colour of a ripe tomato. "Careful with your words, Emil," he growled, the forced smile gone, replaced by a menacing grimace.

"Careful with what, hobbit?" Emil couldn't resist the jab. He lowered his body slightly, mimicking a parent talking to a child. "Do you have a precious, hobbit? Is this your almighty and tall Gandalf, here to scare me or to protect your little treasure?"

The tall man let out a muffled snort, his earlier bravado crumbling under Emil's taunts. The older man, however, remained silent, his eyes burning with a dark fury.

“What’s the matter, hobbit? Did the mouse steal your tongue?” Emil goaded, unable to stop himself.

“I can fetch a ladder from upstairs if you want to have a proper conversation, shorty,” the tall man finally replied, his voice laced with a newfound aggression.

The tension in the room escalated with each passing second. Then, in a blur of movement, everything happened simultaneously.

The old man pulled a small pistol from his inside pocket and before the tall man stop laughing an explosion and a sudden lighting shook the place.

“Oh Jesus man, what have you done?” The tall man shouted at the older man while they were running out of the house.

“He called me hobbit...” the older man said when they managed to reach the car; he entered and drove fast into the fog.

III.

Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson emerged from the commissioner's office on the top floor, his face burning a shade darker than his ruddy complexion. He was just one of several officers who'd received a blistering today from the commissioner, all thanks to a string of unsolved robberies and a recent, unsettling murder that had rocked the usually peaceful city of Växjö.

Växjö wasn't exactly crime central. Far from it, in fact. But a series of copycat robberies targeting computers and gadgets from various offices, including some government buildings, had shaken the trust of the city's residents. The media had gone into overdrive, with social media exploding in frenzy. And the commissioner, Mikael observed with a grimace, seemed to take Facebook and Instagram updates more seriously these days than his own officers.

Mikael felt a surge of frustration. He'd been working tirelessly on the robberies, and now, just when he thought he was making some headway, a murder had landed squarely on his desk. Heaving a sigh, he navigated the labyrinthine corridors of the police headquarters, finally arriving at his cubicle. Inside, a large, round-faced woman sat with a young boy by her side. It was Birgit Persson, the wife of the murdered victim. He couldn't recall the boy's name, but a nagging familiarity pricked at his memory. Before the murder, he corrected himself.

Birgit Persson wasn't known for her patience. In the two days since her husband's death, she'd voiced her scathing opinions about the police department's work ethic in no uncertain terms. Mikael braced himself, knowing it was his turn to face Mrs. Persson's wrath. Her timing, arriving fresh from the commissioner's lecture, couldn't have been more impeccable, or more infuriating.

"Feeling better today, Mrs. Persson?" Mikael began cautiously, hoping to diffuse the situation. "I can't make any promises, but we believe we might have some leads..." He trailed off, searching for the right words.

"And that's supposed to make me feel better, officer?" she snapped back.

"Polisinspektör," he corrected gently.

"Oh, you're a real charmer, aren't you?" Her glare could have curdled milk.

"We're doing our best, Mrs. Persson," Mikael said evenly.

"Just like you're doing your best with those robberies?" Her comment stung.

Mikael closed his eyes, counting silently to ten. He couldn't help but glance at the boy, who sat quietly beside his mother, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the room. It was hard to reconcile the grief-stricken widow with the fiery woman before him.

"I know you, don't I?" Mikael ventured, turning to the boy.

"Same school, same class, sir," the boy replied in a prepubescent voice that still held a hint of childishness. "Same class as your son, I meant sir." He added seen the puzzlement on Polisinspektör glance.

"Stand up straight, Erik," Birgit Persson interjected sharply. The boy did his best, his gaze still fixed on Mikael.

"You were in the house when it happened, weren't you?" Mikael asked gently.

Before Erik could answer, Birgit spoke up again, her voice softer now, almost apologetic. "He was staying with his father because I wasn't feeling well."

"Did you see anything unusual that night?" Mikael persisted ignoring her.

Erik remained silent.

"Speak up, Erik," Birgit Persson barked, her earlier fire returning.

"No, sir," Erik mumbled, looking down at his feet. "Dad told me to stay in my room and not come out."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Just the… the bang," Erik stammered.

"That's enough!" Birgit nearly shouted. "We didn't come here for you to interrogate my son." With surprising agility for her size, she rose from her chair and grabbed Erik's arm, pulling him out of the cubicle.

"Do your damn job," she spat over her shoulder as she stormed out, Erik trailing reluctantly behind her.

Mikael watched them go, a knot of frustration tightening in his gut. He knew Birgit was grieving, but her hostility was making things difficult. He slumped into his chair, the weight of the unsolved cases pressing down on him. He had to find a way forward, not just for the victims' family, but for the peace of mind of the entire city. Taking a deep breath, he started sifting through the case files, determined to crack both the robberies and the Persson murder. He wouldn't let the commissioner, or Mrs. Persson, break him.

IV.

The older man shuffled out of the cafe, his worn leather shoes whispering against the cobblestone sidewalk. A wave of frigid air rolled down Kronobergsgatan, biting through his thin jacket and nipping at his exposed neck. He squinted towards the town square, its centrepiece the imposing building of the old townhall. To its left stood the Grand Hotel, its grand facade marred by clean white paint and some music promotion posters. The old man adjusted his glasses, his gaze lingering on the hotel's darkened windows. There was disquiet in the air, a sense of foreboding that mirrored the churning in his gut.

Across the street, the cafe door creaked open, and his partner emerged. Ex-boxer, all height and muscle, slammed the door shut with unnecessary force

and yanked his coat tighter, his scowl mirroring old man's own unease. They exchanged no pleasantries, the tension between them thick enough to cut with a knife.

"Boss says we got to stick around for a few days," the older man finally muttered, his voice barely audible over the wind whipping around them. "Lay low until things cool down."

The tall man let out a derisive snort. "This dump? Can't stand this place."

"Boss says—" the older man began again, only to be cut off.

"Did you tell him?" tall man's voice was a low growl.

"Accidents happen," the older man snapped, a flicker of defensiveness in his tired eyes.

The tall man's response was a sardonic laugh. "Real tall accident for a shrimp like you." The incident at Emil Persson's show still hung heavy in the air, infecting their interactions with a caustic edge.

"Shut it," the older man hissed, his voice tight with a mixture of anger and fear.

“Didn’t exactly end funny,” the tall man countered, his tone turning grim. “This whole thing ain’t funny. We need to get out of here. Now.”

The older man ran a hand through his thinning gray hair. “Easier said than done. Boss has a plan.”

A flicker of surprise crossed the tall man’s face. “He told you?”

“Yeah.” The older man hesitated, unwilling to meet the tall mans’ gaze. “Said it’s temporary. We blend in. Become part of the scenery.”

They stood there by the car, an aging Volvo with mismatched hubcaps. Its dusty windows reflected the bleakness of the town square, the imposing buildings dwarfed by the heavy, leaden sky. The tall man squinted at a couple hurrying across the square, their faces obscured by scarves and hats.

“Lovely weather for sightseeing, wouldn’t you say?” he muttered, his voice laced with sarcasm.

“Damn place,” he grumbled under his breath for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“Just follow the plan,” the older man said, a hint of desperation creeping into his voice. “A few days.

Make ourselves regulars at that damn cafe. Become part of the furniture. Then, we disappear."

The tall man's response was a humourless bark of a laugh. "Boss' brilliant plan, huh? Blend in, then vanish? Sounds legit."

The older man outlined the plan, his voice monotone. Blend in, avoid suspicion, ditch the guns, ditch the car, melt into the anonymity of the city.

"Always a plan with the boss, ain't there?" The tall man said, his voice dripping with a dark sarcasm.

"Always." The older man offered a weak nod, his eyes filled with a growing sense of doubt.

As they drove away, the silence in the car was heavy with unspoken anxieties. The older man kept glancing nervously at the rearview mirror, a prickling sensation crawling up his spine. "Anyone else getting the feeling we're being watched?" he finally blurted out.

The tall man snorted. "Paranoid much, old man?"

"Maybe," the older man admitted, his voice laced with worry. "Just a feeling."

A heavy silence descended upon them once more.

Then, the tall man spoke, his voice devoid of its usual bravado. “This wasn’t your first time, was it, old man? Emil?”

The old man’s breath hitched. He stared straight ahead, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. “No,” he finally whispered, his voice barely audible.

“Then shut up and deal with it,” the tall man snapped. The anger in his voice couldn’t mask the underlying fear. They were both in this together, two aging thugs clinging to a fading hope of escape.

“Heard the name of the cop lookin’ for us on the news,” the older man said after a long pause. “Hansson. Polisinspektör Hansson.”

The tall man let out a nervous chuckle. “Cool cop-boss makes the news, huh? Figures.” He glanced sideways at the older man, a grim smile playing on his lips. “Guess we got ourselves a celebrity manhunt.”

“Oh, feeling important now?” And with that the tall man pushed the gaspedal for more speed.

V.

Alvar, a sandy-haired kid with eyes like summer skies, perched precariously on a chair at the far table of the small cafe. At twelve years old, he considered himself quite the man. He cradled a steaming cup of cocoa, generously crowned with whipped cream, nibbling on a banana between gulps.

"They must know everything about Emil Persson by now," he declared, his voice thick with importance. "Dad said it was a tough case, old Emil was a secretive one. But don't worry, Dad knows who the killers are."

Across the table sat another boy, roughly the same age, lighter hair but the same piercing blue eyes, mirrored Alvar's cocoa and banana routine. A smear

of cream adorned his upper lip like a mischievous moustache. “Yeah? And what’s your dad got to do with it?” he inquired, the scepticism evident in his tone.

Alvar puffed out his chest. “Loads!” he boasted. “Criminals, murderers, crooks - you name it, Dad knows all about them. More than anyone,” he added with a hushed emphasis, “even more than the police-lady and the commissioner.”

The boy with the lighter hair took a sip of his cocoa, leaving a thicker moustache in its wake. “Sure, and I bet he spills all his top-secret stuff to you, lets you help him catch the bad guys.”

Alvar, caught up in his self-importance, missed the glint of doubt in the other boy’s eyes. He nodded fervently. “My dad and me,” he announced, holding up two crossed fingers, “we’re a team. No secrets, never been any.”

Both boys cast glances towards the corner table by the large window, where two men, one tall and one stout, sat hunched over their coffee, feigning disinterest in their conversation. Alvar winked at the other boy, stealing another decadent sip of his cocoa.

“Do you think he’ll catch them?” the boy with the lighter hair asked, his voice laced with a hint of worry.

“No doubt about it,” Alvar assured him, brimming with confidence. “Dad always gets his man in the end. You just wait and see.” With that declaration, he nodded to his friend, and they both rose from their seats, leaving the cafe at a leisurely pace.

The moment the boys disappeared around the corner of the square, silence descended upon the corner table. “A cop’s son, huh?” the tall man muttered, breaking the quiet.

The older man, a sly smile playing on his lips, emptied his cup with a sigh. “Even better,” he corrected. “That, my friend, is Police Polisinspektör Hansson’s pride and joy, young Hansson.”

The tall man’s eyes widened in surprise. “No way!”

“Absolutely,” the older man confirmed, a genuine smile stretching across his face for the first time in over a day. They sat in thoughtful silence for a moment, a newfound glimmer in their eyes.

Meanwhile, from a safe distance behind the cafe, the boys peeked back through the window. “Think

it worked?" the boy with the lighter hair asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"Of course it worked," Alvar replied confidently. "It's a good plan."

The other boy echoed, "A great plan."

"The Kalle Blomkvist plan," Alvar declared with a proud grin, his eyes searching for the two men among the cafe patrons. He couldn't quite make them out, but moments later, he spotted them exiting, walking briskly towards the parking lot.

"Run!" he hissed, and both boys took off towards Norrgatan, hoping the car with the two men would be headed in the opposite direction.

Their plan was audacious, inspired by their hero, the legendary teenage detective Kalle Blomkvist. Alvar, ever eager to emulate his idol, had devised a scheme to lure the suspects into a false sense of security, hoping they would lead them to a trap and a punishment.

As they hurried down the cobbled street, their hearts pounded with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. They were just kids, but their minds buzzed with the thrill of the chase. They were on the

trail of something big, something that could help Polisinspektör Hansson crack the case.

Little did they know, their actions had ignited a chain reaction. The two men, now aware of Polisinspektör Hansson's son's involvement, found themselves in a precarious situation. Their initial plan, whatever it may have been, was thrown into disarray. They had to act fast, for the innocent curiosity of two young detectives could spell trouble for them.

VI.

Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson rubbed his eyes hard, the office was quiet with the evening shift have taken over the streets leaving only a couple of street cops and a group of cleaning people in the building. He was reading the latest reports and all he could see was a big nothing staring at him.

This case with the robberies really bugged him and the worse of all was what was shouting in the back in his mind and he didn't want to hear it. That little voice saying it is an inside job and so much worst, it is a uniform involved.

Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson had no proof or some kind of lead but it was there and his eyes could see it. He shook his head trying to push away the thoughts and looked back at the murder file. Emil Persson. Another case with no leads but a lot of suspicions and rumours. At least he had suspicions and intuitions and with no obvious reason with this thought his mind connected leads and rumours unexpectedly with his son. He picked the phone and dialled home.

"Doing his homework, wait I'm walking to his room so you can talk to him. Is it going to be another late night Mikael?" It was his wife. "I've got a murder and the commissioner breathing on my back," he answered expecting that this had explained everything needed. She didn't say anything, just passed the phone to their son.

"Hi dad," the boy said.

"Son, do you know a boy called Persson? Is he in your class?"

"He's my best friend, dad." The boy answered sounding almost insulted.

"Your best friend, right," Polisinspektör murmured.

"Dad, how many times you saw him in our house? How many times he ate with me in the kitchen and how many hours we spent playing computer games in my room?"

"Right, right..." The Polisinspektör answered shaking his head. "Not much of a detective, right?" He tried to make a joke of the situation but his son remained silent.

"Has he told you anything about his dad?" Mikael tried again softly.

"The murder?" Straight to the point. Definitely his son. "Yes, the victim." A policeman always Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson corrected his own son.

"He says that you will get to the murderer and arrest him or them."

"He said that?"

"He's sure dad."

"Has he said anything else? Did he hear anything that night or saw something?"

"No dad. I thought you questioned him at the police station." The son said and the father's mind went to Mrs Persson. He had ask the boy but it was the mother who gave all the answers. "Son, can you do something for me? It is really important." The boy left a big sigh and said, "What dad?" "Can you ask him if he heard or saw anything?" "Right dad. Now I got to finish with my homework, bye," and the connection was over. His wife obviously didn't want to talk to him anymore as well and Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson felt really tired with his life. He looked back at the robberies files. Certainly an inside job with good information. A uniform informant.

He closed the file angry. How much he hated it when a policeman was involved in a crime. He always thought that it should be a provision that if a policeman commits a crime the punishment should be double.

"Goddamn!" He shouted at the dark hall, a policeman from the nightshift, the only other member at the office this time of the evening gave him a worrisome look and then he returned to his work.

VII.

The older man, eased into the cafe, the familiar scent of coffee and pastries a comforting counterpoint to the gnawing unease in his gut. He ordered his usual – a strong black coffee and a flaky Danish pastry with the tart berry jam that always managed to stain his fingers. With practiced ease, he navigated the crowded cafe, his worn leather jacket brushing against bustling patrons. Finally, he found a haven in the back room, a small table tucked away by a window that offered a view of the town square bathed in the muted light of a late November afternoon.

This was their third day holed up in this provincial town, Växjö. Three days since Emil Persson had become a national sensation. News of a string of burglaries and a murder had splashed across headlines. Back in Stockholm, their boss had relayed the news with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

"Bad news," the gruff voice had crackled through the phone. "Persson's all over the national rags and even made the evening news. But there's a silver lining. Turns out the local yokels think it's some sort of inside job, a way for Persson and his cronies to line their pockets. Commissioner even called it a 'sharing of profits' on the news. Sounds like Persson's reputation in Växjö is well and truly tarnished." A harsh laugh punctuated the sentence.

The older man's partner, the tall noel, a man who wore his disdain for small towns like a second skin, had chimed in, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips. "See? The mighty Polisinspektör isn't so mighty after all."

The older man had held his tongue. He didn't share the tall man's disdain for Växjö. Sure, it lacked the frenetic energy of Stockholm, but there was a quiet charm to the cobbled streets, the quaint town square, and the ever-present scent of pine that clung to the crisp air. But charm wouldn't solve a case.

"Three days, maybe five max," the tall man had echoed their boss's words, his voice heavy with boredom. "Let's just get this over with."

The older man knew that the tall man loathed be-

ing away from the city. The dampness, the seemingly endless fog, the slow pace of life – everything grated on his nerves. He understood the frustration, but right now, the tall man's impatience was the least of their worries.

"Heading to the cafe," the older man had said, picking up his worn briefcase. "Read my paper, look busy, or something."

"Yeah, yeah. Just gotta check the room service menu first. See if they have anything more exciting than the usual watery fish they call a meal here." The older man had rolled his eyes. Tall man's complaints were as predictable as the sunrise.

Now, as the older man sipped his coffee, a sliver of unease wormed its way back into his gut. A voice, barely a whisper, had pierced the dull roar of the cafe.

"My dad is the Polisinspektör," the voice had declared, full of childish pride, "and he's going to catch all the bad guys. He won't miss a thing!"

The older man turned slowly, his gaze landing on two boys, no older than twelve, huddled at a table behind him. He had seen them before. He recognised the one with the darker hair. Both were scraw-

ny, bundled in oversized jackets, a stark contrast to the mountains of pastries and chocolate milkshakes piled in front of them. Polisinspektör Hansson son.

The dark-haired boy, the one who had spoken, continued, seemingly oblivious to the older man's watchful eyes. "He works slow, but he's already figured things out. I could tell by the way he talked last night."

"What did he say?" asked the other boy, his voice laced with a mixture of curiosity and awe.

"Something about the gun," the dark-haired boy replied, puffing out his chest with importance. "And the crime scene. He's close, I can feel it."

"Did he tell you what?" The boy with the lighter hair asked.

"No, but he will tell me tonight. Dad always tells me everything. He wants me to practice my skills e says."

And with this the two boys finished their drinks and their bans and left the place leaving the old man in deep thought.

VIII.

The boys left the old man in deep contemplation, a strange smile playing on his lips. The tall man, who had just entered the moment the two exited, noticed the expression and raised an eyebrow.

"Are you sure?" the boy with the lighter hair asked, his voice barely a whisper as they hurried towards the fish market across the square.

"Didn't you see his face? The second he heard 'Polisinspektör' he practically vibrated out of his chair. I swear he almost moved to our table to hear better," the boy with dark hair replied, a triumphant smirk spreading across his face.

"Oh boy, oh boy," the lighter-haired boy muttered, before they both broke into a run, disappearing around the corner.

"What happened?" the tall man inquired, placing his coffee and pastry on the table with a slight clatter.

The old man ignored him for a moment, his gaze fixed on the spot where the boys had vanished. A sly smile played on his lips. Finally, he spoke.

"Just had my morning coffee with the most interesting chocolate drinker this town has to offer."

"Are you losing it, Erik? I told you this place is a backwater and it'll eventually get to you," the tall man said, a hint of concern lacing his voice.

The older man, chuckled. "I'm fine, mate. In fact, more than fine," he continued, ignoring the tall man's annoyed expression. "Do you know who the young gentleman was who sat next to me for a creamy chocolate and a cinnamon pastry just before you stumbled in?"

The tall man squinted around the cafe. "What young gentleman?"

"He's gone now, but that's not important," the old

man waved his hand dismissively. “The key is who he was.”

“Well? Who?” the tall man pressed, a knot of apprehension tightening in his stomach.

“The son of Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson,” the older man declared a triumphant glint in his eyes.

The tall man’s jaw dropped. “No way...” he croaked. “Again?

“Way and again!” The older man affirmed.

Across the square, the boys had reached the corner, chests heaving from exertion.

“So, are we calling the police?” The lighter-haired boy panted, his voice laced with worry.

“I told you, no,” the other boy snapped, his outburst surprising his companion. Realizing his friend’s shock, he softened his tone. “Not yet, I mean,” he added hastily.

“Right,” the lighter-haired boy replied, nodding slowly. “But you have a plan, right?”

“Right,” the darker-haired boy confirmed, eyes fixed intently on the cafe across the square.

While being observed by the old man's piercing gaze, a new plan had begun to take shape in his mind. It was a plan that wouldn't involve the police until the very last moment.

Back at the cafe, the tall man took a large bite of his pastry, crumbs scattering on the table. "So, what's this grand scheme of yours, old man?"

"Listening. That's the scheme."

"Listening? That's your master plan? That's a pretty short strategy, wouldn't you say?" The tall man couldn't resist a jab, but the older man simply sighed in exasperation.

"Listen, you oversized oaf," he whispered, his voice low and controlled.

"I'm not an oaf!" The tall man shot back, his voice rising slightly.

The older man shook his head, a wry smile playing on his lips. "And I'm not short," he countered.

The tall man slumped back in his chair, grumbling under his breath. "Alright, alright," he conceded, raising his pastry in a mock surrender, "spill it. What's the actual plan?"

"Think about it," the older man continued, his voice returning to its usual calm. "Those boys come here every day, probably before or after school. They talk, teenagers like to brag."

"Here? In this public place?" Lars scoffed.

"Exactly," the older man said, a predatory glint in his eyes. "Teenage boys have an inflated sense of self-importance. They think no one's listening."

The tall man considered this for a moment. "So, we snatch them up and hold them hostage until they spill their guts?" he asked, his voice a low rumble.

The older man rolled his eyes. "Oh, for Pete's sake, man! We don't resort to brute tactics. We use subtlety. We listen. We glean information. We let them underestimate us."

IX.

The aroma of cinnamon buns hung heavy in the air, a sickly sweet counterpoint to the tension simmering inside the worn café. Ten-year-old Alvar, his dark hair dusted with the remnants of an afternoon spent been outdoors, spoke in hushed tones to his friend, whose blond hair seemed almost luminous in the fading light. Chocolate drinks sat untouched before them, a forgotten duo amidst the urgency in their young voices.

"Dad's very optimistic," Alvar said, his voice barely above a whisper. "He says it's just a matter of time before they catch him."

The other boy, his cheeks bulging with pastry, swallowed with a gulp and a sputter. "Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson," he squealed, the title tumbling out in a rush, "is a very clever man!"

Across the room, two figures sat hunched over steaming mugs of coffee, their keen ears catching every word exchanged by the boys. One, a weathered man with a network of wrinkles etched around his eyes, the other, a hulking figure fidgeted in his chair, his frustration barely contained.

They had been waiting all day, a stakeout that stretched from the pre-dawn quiet to the bustling lunchtime crowd and now, into the twilight lull. The café had been abuzz with activity throughout the day, yet the boys they were waiting for had never materialized. Disappointment gnawed at the tall man, but the older man remained a stoic presence, his weathered face betraying none of his inner turmoil. Patience, he knew, was a virtue often overlooked in their line of work, but one that could prove invaluable. A wry smile played on his lips as he crossed the street for the sixth time that day, a silent testament to his unwavering resolve.

Their vigil finally paid off. As the last rays of sunlight dipped below the rooftops, casting long shadows across the cobbled square, the two boys entered the café, their laughter echoing faintly through the room. Relief washed over the older man, a flicker of triumph in his gaze. By sheer coincidence, they had

managed to snag a table directly behind the boys, their position granting them an unobstructed view and the ability to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"The robberies?" the boy with the lighter hair inquired, his voice laced with youthful curiosity.

Alvar shook his head, a sombre expression replacing his earlier playfulness. "The murder," he corrected. "Dad's sure they're still here."

"Really?" the boy's voice dropped to a whisper.

"He says they're waiting for things to calm down before they run," Alvar explained.

"Wow," the boy with the lighter hair breathed, his eyes wide with awe.

"He says he knows how these scumbags think," Alvar continued, his voice filled with a confidence that belied his young age. "The police are watching trains, buses and highways, so they stay here for the police to get tired or for other crimes to come up."

The other boy let out a mischievous chuckle. "We're not Stockholm, you know," he said, a hint of pride in his voice. "Not exactly a criminal hotspot."

They both grinned, clinking their chocolate mugs in a silent toast.

"Dad says criminals are stupid," Alvar declared, and the other boy nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

The boys finished their drinks, their restless energy barely contained. They longed to be free, to escape the confines of the café and return to the carefree world of childhood. Hurriedly, they made their way out of the café and onto the deserted square. Reaching the far corner, away from the watchful eyes of the patrons inside, they stopped, catching their breath.

"Gosh, the last time he passed in front of the café, I thought he saw us," the boy with the lighter hair said, his voice trembling slightly.

"They are stupid," Alvar reassured him, his voice firm despite the tremor in his hands. "I can't believe they haven't noticed us following them all day!"

A triumphant smirk played on Alvar's lips as they finally set off for home, the weight of their secret a heavy burden on their young shoulders. They were already late, the after-school activities a distant memory replaced by the thrill of their clandestine mission.

"We need more," the older man murmured once

the boys were out of sight. His voice, etched with a newfound urgency, echoed in the cavernous café. “We need more information, and that boy is the only way to get it.”

The tall man shot him a look of disbelief. “A boy?” he exclaimed, his voice laced with frustration. “Are you serious? Does the boss know?”

“The boss knows what he needs to know and we need to get out of this mouse trap. Can you understand that?

“What mouse trap?”

“Didn’t you hear the boy? The police are watching trains, buses and highways.”

“They have no description of the car or us.”

“You don’t know what they have...” The older man said and he stood up. “I’m going for a walk, I need to think.” And saying that he walked out of the cafe leaving the tall man thinking that perhaps time had come to move to a pub. He also needed to do some thinking.

X.

Rain lashed against the grimy window of the dingy motel room, the rhythm a relentless drumbeat against the thin pane. Inside, the air hung heavy with a mixture of stale cigarette smoke and nervous tension. The older man, his weathered face etched with worry lines deeper than any crow's feet, slammed his fist on the chipped tabletop. "There's a kid. Skinny little thing, I saw his silhouette, his shadow. keeps following me. I can feel it in my bones," he rasped, his voice strained.

The tall one, scoffed. "Probably a stray cat, skittish in this weather. You know how it gets in these one-horse towns."

“Växjö isn’t a one-horse town,” the older man muttered quietly.

“Blimey, what’s gotten into you, old man? Turning sentimental in your old age?” the tall guy said, a harsh laugh escaping his lips as he shifted his gaze to the rain streaking down the window.

“No, no. I’m sure,” the older man insisted, rubbing his calloused hand across his brow, anxiety twisting in his gut. A lifetime spent in the shadows had taught him to trust his instincts, and his instincts were screaming. His line of work wasn’t exactly one that garnered a fanbase.

Across town, huddled beneath a dripping awning, was the source of the older man’s unease. The dark-haired boy, shivered, not entirely from the cold. His thin frame, clad in clothes several sizes too big, seemed dwarfed by the unforgiving weather. He’d been tailing the two men for days, ever since the fateful night that stole his father’s life. He shook his head, a futile attempt to dislodge the grief that gnawed at him. There was no time for tears, only for resolve. He had a plan, a risky one fuelled by desperation and a burning desire for justice.

The next morning, a strange quiet settled over

Växjö. Schools were closed for a county teachers' meeting, leaving an unsettling emptiness in the usually bustling streets. The rain had mercifully subsided into a cold drizzle, clinging to the buildings like a damp shroud. The boy, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs, positioned himself outside a small cafe in Sandgärdsgatan, not far from the police headquarters. He'd seen the two men enter earlier, a different choice from their usual greasy spoon haunt.

Taking a deep breath, the boy pushed open the door, a tremor of fear running through him. The familiar jingle of the bell cut through the cafe's quiet murmur. Heads turned, curious gazes settling on the bedraggled figure standing in the doorway.

A voice, gruff yet kind, cut through the silence. "Lost, son?" Officer Carl Nisson, a friendly-faced cop with a worn leather jacket that seemed to tell a thousand stories, stood beside him. Shame flooded the boy's face. He couldn't tell the truth, not yet. Not in front of these watchful eyes.

"Just looking for my dad," he mumbled, hoping the officer wouldn't press.

The cop's eyes softened. He knew the boy, and he knew his dad. He knew all too well the tragedy that

had shattered the quiet life of this small town. Officer Carl Nisson sighed deeply, the weight of unspoken words hanging heavy in the air.

"Yes, this is his place," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. He avoided using any past tense or mentioning the darkness that had shrouded the once vibrant man. "Here, have some hot cocoa. Warm you up." He added, nodding at the woman behind the counter.

The boy felt uneasy. The two men, just a few meters away, sat hunched over steaming mugs, their silence deafening. But saying no word, he settled into the worn booth next to the police officer, staring down at the cup with the cartoon reindeer that had just landed in front of him.

He sipped the sweet drink, the warmth a small comfort against the icy knot of fear in his stomach. As he stole a glance at Officer Carl Nisson, a plan B began to flicker in his mind. Maybe there was another way.

"Officer," the boy said, leaning closer to the policeman, his voice barely a whisper. "I saw a suspicious guy this morning. He looked like..." he described the older man, hoping the description and the knowl-

edge of who the boy was would trigger something in the officer's mind. At least make him look around.

Officer Nisson's brow furrowed, and instinctively his gaze darted around the cafe. But it was more from worry than genuine interest. "Hold on a second, son, and calm down," he said softly. "I know who you are and I know who your father was," he said softly. "But you cannot go around accusing people for something like that. Let the police do the work and we know what we are doing." The man said and looked at the young boy with real pain.

"Drink your cocoa and then go back home." And with that he stood up. "And me, well I have some robbers to catch," he added smiling.

The boy looked at the thick man exit the cafe and then he felt the two men staring at him. He put on his jacket fast and almost run outside. Time for plan C.

XI.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the boy's cluttered bedroom, the faint light a stark contrast to the day of rain that had come before. Maps, newspaper clippings, and a chaotic web of child drawings plastered the bulletin board – portraits of two men, their faces rendered in a mix of seriousness and childish enthusiasm. Opposite him, perched on a beanbag chair, sat his best friend, his constant companion in this hunt.

"Alright," the boy with the darker hair, tapped a worn picture of the 'older guy'. "We know them, and I think they suspect we've been following them."

"We also know the older guy is the ringleader," the lighter-haired boy, added.

"Right."

"And he thinks you're Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson's son."

A grin spread across Alvar's face. "That was cool."

"And now we need to catch them," the other boy said, standing up and walking beside Alvar to stand in front of the bulletin board.

"We need help."

"Police help."

Alvar chuckled. "Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson's help," he corrected, and they both turned their gazes back to the sketches of the older man and his tall, thin accomplice.

"Right," the boy with the lighter hair conceded. "We need a plan."

Both boys nodded a determined glint in their eyes.

Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson listened intently as Officer Carl Nisson described the scene at the cafe. A heavy silence hung in the air as Nisson finished his report.

"You know, Carl," Hansson began, his voice laced with a hint of frustration, "from the very beginning,

I've had this feeling there are pieces missing from this puzzle. And to top it all off, my son keeps telling me the Persson boy has been acting strangely lately."

Nisson, his face etched with exhaustion, sighed. "Well sir, with everything that's happened, wouldn't that be considered normal? Losing his dad like that..."

"Yes, of course," Hansson conceded, his voice softening. "How's your progress on the hunt going, Carl?" he added abruptly, wanting to steer the conversation in a different direction.

Nisson, a man who believed honesty was always the best policy, especially with Hansson, replied sincerely, "Not very well, sir, to be honest."

A knowing smile played on Hansson's lips. "I have a hunch," he said, his gaze intense. "I want you to check something for me. It's a long shot, but I believe these perpetrators came from abroad, maybe just for a weekend heist. They likely pulled off their last robbery on Sunday evening and then hightailed it back home, wherever that may be."

The room full of officers swivelled their heads in Hansson's direction, curiosity etched on their faces.

"There have been reports about a gang operating

out of Denmark...” Hansson continued, his voice trailing off as a dark shadow flickered across his eyes. “And they had help,” he added pointedly.

“Local help,” Officer Carl blurted out, the realization dawning on him.

“Precisely,” Hansson said a grim satisfaction in his voice. He turned and walked towards his office, leaving Nisson with a gnawing question in his gut. Nisson, however, held his tongue. He didn’t follow the Polisinspektör, but a seed of doubt had been firmly planted. ‘Good information’ – those were the words Hansson had used. And that, Nisson thought, was a very good lead to follow.

He moved back to his desk, his mind racing. Were Hansson’s suspicions about the missing pieces connected to Emil Persson’s murder, or the recent string of robberies? Nisson couldn’t help but steal a glance at Hansson’s office. The Polisinspektör was staring out the window, his face a mask of contemplation.

“No way,” Nisson thought to himself. There’s no way he could be thinking what I’m thinking. He’s not that old, what, mid-forties? He wouldn’t have been here back in the eighties. Even I can barely remember that time; I was just a rookie cop. But then again, we’re all human, aren’t we?

Nisson looked around the room at his colleagues hunched over their computers and files. 'Policemen are just humans,' he thought, a melancholic truth settling over him. With a determined sigh, he switched on his computer and began combing through the robbery reports once more, his eyes searching for the hidden connection, the single thread that would unravel the entire case.

XII.

The steam from their cocoa drinks swirled upwards; momentarily obscuring the two boys huddled in the corner of the cafe. The dark hair boy that perpetually seemed windswept spoke animatedly, his voice barely a whisper. Beside him, his friend, with a mop of lighter hair, listened intently, his eyes fixed on the swirling patterns in his mug.

They had chosen their table strategically, directly next to the two men nursing coffees in stony silence. The name "Mikael Hansson" fluttered from Alvar's lips like a secret mantra. He punctuated it occasionally with a reverent "Dad," subtly dropping hints to the silent duo.

Suddenly, the older man, his weathered face etched with stories untold, swivelled his chair. His gaze, sharp and inquisitive, landed on Alvar. “Your dad’s Hansson, isn’t he?” he rumbled, his voice surprisingly gentle. “Mikael Hansson, the Polisinspektör?”

Alvar smirked, a glint of triumph in his dark eyes. “That’s right! You know him?”

The men exchanged a glance, a silent conversation passing between them. The taller one, a lean figure with a neatly trimmed beard, cleared his throat. “We do, in a way. We’re detectives ourselves, you see. From up north, just passing through.”

“Oh,” Alvar said, attempting to Polisinspektör Hansson professional demeanour. “Working on a case?”

“Something like that,” the tall man replied, his brow furrowing slightly. “But this Emil Persson business, it’s caught our attention too. You know, learning from the best and all that.”

A tense silence stretched between them. Finally, Alvar couldn’t hold back. “Did you hear what they’re saying? Dad’s about to crack the case! He’s the smartest detective ever.”

The older man inched closer, his gaze now fixed intently on Alvar. “Who does your dad think did it? This Emil Persson, he seemed like a good man. No trouble.”

The taller man leaned forward, mirroring his companion’s movement. Alvar, enjoying the unexpected attention, lowered his voice conspiratorially. “Dad figured it all out. Some gangsters, probably from the capital. They were in business with Emil, owed them money, and got scared.” A shiver ran down Alvar’s spine as he continued, “Dad says Emil knew they were after him.”

The two men exchanged another look, this one laced with a newfound seriousness. The older man shook his head, a grim expression settling on his face. “Mafia killing, that’s bad news.”

Alvar, still playing his part, nodded solemnly. “Dad says criminals aren’t as smart as they think they are. They have no flexibility. He’s sure they’re hiding out right here, in town.”

The boy with the lighter hair shot a worried glance at Alvar, but the boy, enthralled by his own performance, continued. “He doesn’t know where, exactly,” Alvar whispered, “but he thinks they’ll be leaving soon. Tonight or tomorrow.”

The two men exchanged sceptical glances. “He knows all that, does he?” the older man asked, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

Alvar puffed out his chest, pride swelling within him. “Definitely! And he knows they still have the gun.” He paused for dramatic effect. “They’re planning to get rid of it before leaving town, so it can’t be traced back to them. Dad says they’re amateurs. He says if they had any brains they’d...”

His voice trailed off, a sudden realization dawning. The tall man leaned forward, eyes gleaming with curiosity. “If they had any brains, they’d do what, kid?” he prompted.

“Learning from the masters,” the older man added, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

Alvar swallowed hard. “They’d get rid of the gun before leaving town,” he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe take it out at night and drop it somewhere... the recycling centre, perhaps?”

A mischievous glint returned to his eyes. “Because they’re not going anywhere. Dad’s got people everywhere, you see. Plainclothes officers at the train station, bus stops, motorway exits... checking everyone. Already.”

He leaned back in his chair, a satisfied smirk plastered across his face. “Dad says criminals are stupid,” he declared, mimicking Polisinspektör Hansson’s gruff voice again.

XIII.

The cobblestones beneath their feet whispered a quiet rhythm as the two men navigated the maze of backstreets. Unlike the bustling avenue they'd just left behind, with its chattering food places, cafes and nervous drivers looking for a parking space, these narrow lanes felt like a secret passage leading them away from the world. Yet, a heavy silence hung between them, as thick as the stale cigarette smoke clinging to old man's clothes.

Finally, unable to contain his worry any longer, the older one almost shouted. "How did he know? How did he know everything in such detail?"

"It doesn't matter," the tall one said. "It doesn't matter why and how he knows, the thing is that he knows."

The older man stopped abruptly, his weathered face twisting into a scowl. “Doesn’t matter? The boy just laid out our entire plan, from the rotten pistol all the way to the escape route! How can you say it doesn’t matter?”

“Dwelling on it won’t change anything,” the tall man stated, resuming his walk. “We need to adapt. We’re not some inflexible amateurs, are we?” and while he was reaching the end of his sentence he gave a strange look at the old guy and suddenly he started laughing. The older one’s face clouded with annoyance. “What’s so funny?”

“That we are lucky, dude. We are riding in luck!” And his laugh got louder and deeper. “The only thing we have to do is follow the kindly advice of Polisinspektör Hansson.”

The older man shook his head, “what?” “Remember what Polisinspektör Hansson said about us the last time? ‘Too stiff, too predictable,’ wasn’t it?” And then looking straight at the old man eyes he added, “But we are clever and we are flexible and we are going to change plans and first of all we are going to recycle the gun.” And he laughed again.

His words hung in the air for a moment before

the old man's expression cleared. Understanding replaced fear as the pieces clicked into place. "He's expecting us at the bus station or the train depot," he murmured, more to himself than to the tall man. "And the car..."

"Exactly," the tall man cut in, his laughter subsiding into a chuckle. "He thinks we'll be stupid enough to take a car, sticking to our original plan like fools."

A slow smile, genuine this time, spread across the older man's face. "So, we recycle the gun," he said, savouring the words. "Just like that annoying the Polisinspektör suggested."

Tal man's grin returned. "Exactly! And then we walk. Just a nice casual stroll out of town. He won't be expecting that, will he?"

The tension that had been simmering between them dissipated, replaced by a sense of renewed purpose and a dash of morbid amusement. Here they were, seasoned criminals outsmarted by a by-the-book policeman, yet they still held the upper hand. All thanks to Polisinspektör Hansson unwitting advice and his son who passed it on.

As they continued their walk, their conversation

shifted. They discussed the safest route out of town and the best bus route to disappear into the anonymity of the highway.

Their walk soon took them past the city's Cathedral and the park that surrounded the majestic building, where children shrieked with delight on a rusty swing set. The sight prompted a pang of nostalgia in old man's mind. It had been years since he'd felt anything close to joy, years since their life of crime had become a relentless cycle of tension and paranoia.

He glanced at the thin man, catching a similar flicker of longing in his eyes. Yet, unspoken words hung between them, they were too deep in, the escape route too narrow to consider a different life.

XIV.

After taking a short walk to clear their minds, they returned to their car, their thoughts consumed by the urgent task of mapping their escape route.

The air hung heavy as they continued their aimless drive, the silence punctuated only by the rhythmic hum of the engine. The older man, face creased with worry, feigned sleep, his mind a whirlwind of activity. Escape. Disappear. Start anew. These were the mantras that echoed in his head, a desperate battle cry against the tightening grip of fear.

Across the seat, the younger man, still bristling from the policeman's barb, fumed silently. "Stupid," the word echoed in his mind, a stinging reminder of their precarious situation. He gripped the steering wheel tighter, knuckles turning white, channelling his frustration into a concentrated effort to appear

nonchalant. Yet, beneath the facade, a storm raged. He stole glances at his companion, searching for some sign, some clue as to their next move.

"Are you okay?" the tall man's voice interrupted the older man's reverie, mistaking his companion's contemplative sigh for distress.

"Dude, do you have the feeling that we have been followed?" The older man asked.

His taller companion shot him a sceptical glance through the rearview mirror. "Trying to scare me?" he retorted.

"No, not now. I mean in general," clarified the old man, his tone serious.

"In general? What, in the general store? The supermarket?" joked the tall man, attempting to lighten the mood.

The older man shook his head, about to retort when a police car rounded the corner, trailing just behind them. "It's true what they say about old fogies and bad luck!" the tall man quipped nervously.

"Just drive, idiot," the old man snapped, urgency tainting his voice.

"Just drive calmly, like a normal day," he added, unsure if his companion could keep his composure. The tall man was always the jittery one, a fact reaffirmed by memories of their near arrest up north with firearms in the back seat.

Thankfully, the police car veered off at the next intersection, heading towards the train station, and they both released a collective sigh of relief.

"You heard the boy, they're checking train and bus stations," the tall man remarked, tension still evident in his voice.

"Back to the plan," the old man stated firmly, his mind set on disposing of the gun and escaping the confines of this dismal town.

The tall man seethed silently, nursing the sting of being called 'stupid' by the policeman. "I'm not stupid," he seethed inwardly, stealing a glance at the old man beside him, eyes closed, lost in thought. 'Probably asleep,' he mused, steering the car aimlessly through the town for another hour.

Little did he know, the old man was far from asleep; his mind was preoccupied with plotting their next move, one that would take them far from the shores

of Växjö Lake, perhaps even away from the capital and all its familiar faces. Retirement beckoned, a quiet life far removed from the chaos of their current predicament.

Meanwhile, as the two men strategized their escape from Växjö, the boy with the darker hair wrestled with his own internal turmoil. He knew he should warn Polisinspektör Hansson about his plans and the unfolding situation, but how? The mere thought of the Polisinspektör ‘s potential anger sent shivers down his spine. Television had taught him that police Polisinspektör s didn’t take kindly to amateurs meddling in their affairs, often with deadly consequences.

Lost in thought, he gazed out of his bedroom window and spotted a familiar figure turning the corner: Officer Karl Nisson.

A smile tugged at the corners of the boy’s lips. Perhaps there was a way.

XV.

Officer Karl Nisson was a policeman with a very odd situation. He was following somebody not suspecting that two very young eyes were watching him.

Following Polisinspektör's hint and his own hunch he had gone through some of the files of fellow policemen serving in the headquarters and to his not so big surprise he found out that four were moonlighting for a security company. One for the security company responsible for the protection of most of the buildings that had been hit.

That was yesterday's news; today's news was a new car. A very cool car for a cop's salary and Karl knew very well what's a cop's salary is. So he decided to act before reporting his finding to Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson.

That would move everything from a hunch to suspicions and from suspicions to questions and Karl didn't feel ready for something like that yet. Accusing a fellow police officer for a crime wasn't something to take light and it had consequences Karl had seen in the past and didn't want to live in the future. So he followed.

Officer Karl Nisson stood up as Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson entered the office floor early the following morning. He watched the seasoned Polisinspektör move with a sense of purpose, his demeanour exuding authority. With a quick nod to his colleagues and a glance at Karl, Hansson's expression remained unreadable, though Karl sensed an anticipation of unwelcome news.

"Come inside, Karl," Hansson's voice resonated with a mixture of command and curiosity, inviting Karl into his office.

Karl followed his mind racing with the weight of what he had discovered. He couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled in his gut since he stumbled upon the suspicious activities of his fellow officers. As he stepped into Hansson's office, Karl took in the familiar surroundings—the organized chaos of paperwork, the stern yet approachable presence of the Polisinspektör behind his desk.

Hansson gestured for Karl to take a seat opposite him, his eyes searching Karl's face for any indication of what lay ahead. Karl hesitated for a moment, grappling with the gravity of his findings and the implications of his next words. But he knew he couldn't delay any longer; the truth demanded action.

"Sir," Karl began, his voice steady despite the turmoil within him, "I've uncovered something that I believe requires your immediate attention."

Hansson leaned forward, his expression shifting to one of keen interest mixed with concern. "Go on, Karl. What have you found?"

Taking a deep breath, Karl recounted the events of the past few days—the subtle clues, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place, leading him to the unsettling truth about his colleagues' involvement in the security company. He spared no detail, his words measured yet resolute as he laid out his suspicions before the Polisinspektör .

As Karl spoke, Hansson listened intently, his brow furrowing with each revelation. It was clear that Karl's words weighed heavily on him, the implications of corruption within their ranks a stain on the integrity of the force.

When Karl finished, there was a moment of silence between them, the air heavy with the weight of what had been revealed. Hansson leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on Karl with a mix of admiration and concern.

"You've done well, Karl," he said finally, his voice tinged with a hint of sombreness. "What you've uncovered is deeply troubling, but it's imperative that we address it swiftly and decisively."

Karl nodded, a sense of relief washing over him at Hansson's validation. He had feared that his suspicions would be dismissed or ignored, but Hansson's reaction reassured him that he had done the right thing in coming forward.

"I'll need your full cooperation in this matter, Karl," Hansson continued, his tone firm. "We'll launch an internal investigation immediately, and we'll need to gather evidence discreetly to ensure we don't tip off the suspects."

Karl nodded again, his determination renewed. He knew that the road ahead would be fraught with challenges and uncertainties, but he was resolved to see it through to the end. The integrity of the force depended on it, and he would do whatever it took to uphold it.

XVI.

Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson's day had been a whirlwind. He was locked away in his office, oblivious to the young boy who'd slipped past reception. The boy, face etched with disappointment, had inquired about Officer Karl Nilsson, only to learn he was entangled in a meeting with the Polisinspektör and two other officers. Inside the Polisinspektör 's office, hours hunched over reports had taken their toll. Stacks of paperwork littered the desks, each officer's face reflecting a weary understanding – they were dealing with a divorced man, burdened by gambling and a well-known fondness for the bottle.

The afternoon shift brought Officer Olle Lindgren. Fresh out of the locker room, he was escorted straight into an interrogation room, greeted by three nervous men and a fuming Polisinspektör Hansson.

Karl, sensing the tension, kept his distance. He remained glued to his desk in the common room when a prickling sensation washed over him. “Oh, crap,” he muttered under his breath, glancing up to find a pair of eyes fixated on him.

A chain reaction of thoughts fired in his mind. First, the promise he’d made to the young boy. Then, the realization that this might be the perfect distraction from Officer Lindgren’s case. The boy approached hesitantly. A nod and a warm smile from Karl coaxed him to sit. While Karl toyed with the notion of a chocolate drink from the vending machine down the hall, the boy began to speak. The surprise quickly morphed into shock, then fear, then back to bewilderment.

Ten minutes flew by in a blur. The boy spoke without pause, finally stopping with a deep sigh and a downward gaze, a mixture of pride and embarrassment clinging to his posture. Karl found himself speechless, caught in a whirlwind of emotions. He rose from his chair, pacing in front of his desk, then back. He stood, eyes flitting towards the Polisinspektör ‘s office. Empty. No shouts, no frantic calls for him. Just an unsettling silence that echoed the confusion gnawing at him.

The boy's story, a whirlwind of its own, had thrown Karl off balance. It was a stark contrast to the monotony of the paperwork he was accustomed to. A sense of intrigue, unfamiliar and potent, bubbled within him. He glanced back at the boy, who now nervously picked at a loose thread on his sleeve. An unexpected turn of events had disrupted the day's predictable flow. He looked at the Polisinspektör's office. Nobody's there.

Across town, in the dimly lit haven of a familiar cafe, two figures huddled at a corner table, their faces obscured by the rising steam from their mugs. The older man leaned closer to the taller one cross the table, his voice barely a rasp. "One, one in the morning," he whispered, the words hanging heavy in the air thick with the aroma of stale coffee. "Perfect hour for a sleepy town like Växjö. Everyone tucked safely in their beds."

The other man, the tall one with a nervous energy that flickered in his eyes, nodded curtly. He peered out the rain-streaked window, momentarily distracted by the sight of a young couple hurrying past, their laughter swallowed by the downpour. An older woman followed, her figure dwarfed by the enormous black umbrella she struggled to hold against the wind.

“Weather’s on our side,” the tall man muttered, his voice barely a murmur.

The older man chuckled, a dry rasping sound. Rain, he mused, a good friend to those needing to conceal their actions. It washed away footprints, blurred vision, and provided a comforting white noise that masked even the most unsettling sounds. Tonight, the rain-soaked streets of Växjö would be their accomplice.

He finished his coffee with a grimace, the bitter taste a poor reflection of the anxiety gnawing at him. This would be their final night in this city, a city that had, unknowingly, become their stage for one last act. The thought sparked a flicker of melancholy in his chest. He had grown accustomed to the quiet cafes and the predictable rhythm of life here. But sentimentality was a luxury they couldn’t afford.

Pushing himself to his feet, he met the tall man’s gaze, a silent exchange passing between them. They had meticulously planned for weeks, anticipating every move, every contingency. There was no room for second thoughts now.

“Alright,” the older man finally spoke, his voice firm despite the tremor in his hands. “Let’s go

over the plan one last time. Remember, precision is key. We don't have room for mistakes." The taller man swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously in his throat. He nodded, a ghost of defiance flickering in his eyes. He may have been new to this dance, but he was determined to prove himself.

The older man detailed the plan once more, his voice a low monotone. The plan was audacious, bordering on reckless. But they were desperate, and it was inspired from Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson himself, the older man thought with a smirk on the edge of his lips.

Meanwhile, back at the police station, Karl Nilsson wrestled with his own set of anxieties. The boy's story, though fantastical, held a ring of truth. The gun, the recycling centre. These details were readily verifiable. But what truly bothered Karl was the boy's demeanour, the boldness he had seen on the boy's eyes and that strange coldness of vengeance.

"Emil Persson's son," he murmured to himself and slammed his fist onto the desk, scattering the papers across the cluttered surface. He needed to act, and fast. Time to talk with the Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson and the time was now!

XVII

Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson came out of the interrogation room with a thin smile of satisfaction etched across his face. It was a rare sight these days in the gritty world of law enforcement, but it was well-earned. The suspect, Officer Olle Lindgren, had cracked under the pressure of relentless questioning from three men plus Mikael Hansson, and the case was inching closer to resolution with all the missing pieces of the puzzle coming together.

However, his moment of triumph was short-lived as he spotted Officer Karl Nilsson waiting for him in the corridor, his hands fidgeting nervously. Mikael could sense trouble brewing just by the look on Karl's face.

“Boss, we need to talk urgently,” Karl blurted out as soon as Mikael approached him. Without a word, Mikael grabbed Karl’s arm and steered him into an empty interrogation room nearby.

“Karl, I like you, and you know it, but this is not the right time for…” Mikael began, but Karl interrupted him urgently.

“Wait, give me five minutes to tell you what’s going on, and then you judge if I was right to come here or not,” Karl pleaded, his eyes wide with urgency.

Mikael sighed, conceding to Karl’s request. “Fine, you got three minutes,” he relented, taking a seat in one of the cold metal chairs.

And so Karl began to spill his tale. He recounted the events involving Emil Persson’s son, how the boy had recognized the individuals who had threatened his father before. Karl described how the boy had followed them, cunningly pretending to be ... Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson’s son, and then cleverly insinuating that his father had devised a plan to capture them. The only way, according to the boy’s story, to evade capture was to dispose of the murder weapon at the recycling centre that very night.

Mikael sat in stunned silence, processing Karl's words. It seemed almost too surreal to believe. A young boy orchestrating a plan to catch criminals? It sounded like something out of a crime novel rather than reality.

"He's outside," Karl said, breaking the silence. "I can take you to him so he can repeat the story."

But before Karl could finish his sentence, Mikael erupted into laughter. It started as a few chuckles before escalating into full-blown hysterics. His laughter echoed off the cold walls of the interrogation room, drawing puzzled looks from those passing by outside.

"Oh gosh, the damn recycling centre…" Mikael managed between fits of laughter, wiping tears from his eyes.

Karl watched his boss with a mixture of confusion and concern. "You find this funny?" he asked incredulously.

Mikael finally managed to compose himself, wiping the last traces of laughter from his eyes. "You're the one who won't believe it, Karl," he said with a smirk. "The robbers have hidden their loot in a room at the recycling centre, and since they have one of

their own playing security guard tonight, none other than Officer Olle Lindgren, they're planning to move it out of town!"

Karl's eyes widened in realization. "Oh shit." Mikael nodded, his expression serious now. "Looks like we've stumbled onto something bigger than we anticipated. A double play." He said, his mind already racing with plans and strategies.

Without wasting another moment, Mikael and Karl sprung into action. They hurried out of the interrogation room, their footsteps echoing down the corridor as they made their way to the exit of the police station.

Outside, the night air was crisp and cool, a stark contrast to the tension that hung in the air. Mikael could feel the weight of the impending confrontation settling on his shoulders, but he pushed aside any doubts or fears. There was no time for hesitation; they had to act fast if they were going to catch all of them red-handed.

XVIII

The moon hung low in the sky, casting a silvery glow over the deserted streets of the city. It was the kind of night where shadows seemed to dance in the corners, and the air was thick with anticipation. Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson stood outside the recycling center, his breath forming small clouds in the chilly air. Beside him, his team of officers waited, their eyes sharp and focused, ready for whatever might come their way.

Across the way, Officer Karl Nilsson and his team were stationed by the back gate, hidden behind the crumbling facade of an old building. They were waiting for the signal, the faintest hint that their target was approaching.

Inside the guard's cubicle by the main gate, Officer Olle Lindgren sat patiently, his eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of movement. He had promised to help bring down the criminals who had been using the recycling center to store their loot in exchange for a more favourable sentence.

As the minutes ticked by, Mikael's radio crackled to life, a single blip signaling that it was time to move. Without hesitation, he motioned to his team, and they sprang into action, moving swiftly and silently through the shadows.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the recycling center, Karl and his team tensed as they saw the headlights of a car approaching the back gate. They had received detailed descriptions and sketches from Emil Persson's son, who had bravely come forward with information about the men who had killed his father.

As the car came to a stop, Karl held his breath, his heart pounding in his chest. He knew that tonight was their best chance to catch the criminals red-handed, and he was determined not to let them slip through their fingers.

The older man stepped out of the car, his face set in

a grim expression as he prepared to toss the gun over the fence. But before he could make his move, Karl was upon him, his training taking over as he subdued the man with a swift blow to the shoulder. The older man stumbled backward, his eyes wide with shock as Karl's team moved in to make the arrest.

Back at the main gate, Mikael rounded a corner and came face to face with one of the criminals, a look of surprise flickering across the man's face as he realized he'd been caught. Without hesitation, Mikael sprang into action, his years of training guiding his every move as he swiftly apprehended the criminal and placed him in handcuffs. Moments later, two more criminals were taken into custody by Mikael's team, their protests falling on deaf ears as they were led away into the night.

As they drove back to the station, Mikael couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction wash over him. Despite the odds stacked against them, they had managed to crack both cases and bring the criminals to justice. It was a testament to their skill and determination, as well as the invaluable help they had received from Emil Persson's son.

Beside him, Karl grinned, a sense of camaraderie settling between them as they shared a moment

of victory. “Remind me never to underestimate the power of a good story,” Mikael said with a chuckle, reflecting on how the information provided by Emil Persson’s son had played a crucial role in their success.

Karl nodded in agreement, his voice filled with pride. “You got it, boss,” he said, his eyes shining with excitement. “And by the way, don’t forget to inform your... new son about the arrests. I have a feeling he’s waiting for us upstairs.”

Mikael’s heart swelled with gratitude as he thought about the young boy who had helped them bring down the criminals. He had shown courage beyond his years, and Mikael knew that they owed him a debt of gratitude.

Inside the station, the atmosphere was charged with excitement as the officers filed in, their faces flushed with victory. They had faced down danger and emerged victorious, and they knew that tonight would be remembered as a triumph for law and order in the city.

As Mikael made his way upstairs to inform Emil Persson’s son of the arrests, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride in his team. They had worked tireless-

ly to bring the criminals to justice, and tonight their hard work had paid off in ways they could never have imagined.

Opening the door to the room where Emil Persson's son was waiting, Mikael was met with a smile that lit up the room. "We did it," the boy said, his eyes shining with pride. "We caught them."

Mikael nodded, his heart swelling with pride as he looked at the brave young boy who had helped them crack the case. "Yes, we did," said the boy his voice filled with emotion.

THE END

All the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The son of Vengeance

Thanos Kalamidas

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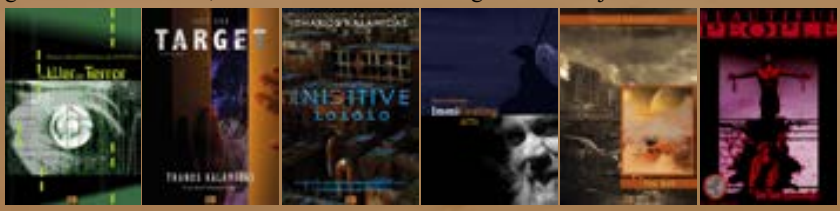
"Dad says, criminals are stupid."

THE SON OF VENGEANCE

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.



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